



**ON “RED ROOM #4” BY JEREMY ERIC TENENBAUM**

Introspection is another issue which split PFS down the middle. Of the four main guys, Mike and I were the introspective ones. Jeremy loved to play the role of the tortured genius, but heavy soul-work, involving emotions, relationships, and his early family life, were not for him. He even discouraged his friends and acolytes from believing in the existence of the soul. That's one reason I laughed when I stumbled over “Red Room #4.” Whether he realized it or not (he might've been channeling subconscious energy), Jeremy had painted a self-portrait of his soul in purgatory. The unnatural position of his head and neck, the unusual angle from which it's shot and the heavy “paint it black” shading give him an extremely demonic appearance. It could even be his soul in hell, rather than purgatory. As has been mentioned

elsewhere, Jeremy grew up in South Jersey surrounded by Catholics— his tactile hell was, I’m sure, partly internalized by osmosis. That’s something I learned from the Free School years too — a sense of sin. Some of this was about carnality, even more of it was about gossip, and it added a sheen of final (and metaphysical) judgment to the dispersal of the square in ’06-’07. Yet, for Jeremy and I, the judgment was providential— we were about to do our best work.

As of 2013, there are certainly reasons for some of us to repent— especially because, for many Free School participants (including Mr. Tenenbaum and Mr. Gruberg), whatever final judgment subsists for human souls has already been faced. Knowing Jeremy, however, there would have to be levels of irony and tongue-in-cheek in his own miniaturized Dantean vision. Unlike the PFS classicists (myself, Mary, and Abby), Jeremy wasn’t completely repulsed by post-modern prankishness. Jeremy here explores his identity in the post-modern manner (maybe; as always, Jeremy teases the situation into potential contradiction)— is art inherently demonic, and is the artist a demon figure; or is the artist-as-demon a stale joke there to be resuscitated for cheap laughs and comfort food? By resolutely playing the middle in “Red Room #4,” Jeremy again creates a dangerous context, for post-modernists and everybody else— safe only if you stay on the surface. However much he disdained introspection (and, from Mike and I, the psychobabble which went with it) in his life, art allowed Jeremy a vista where he could open up and create what he wanted from his insides, which were considerable, and devoid of the rich-kid pampered snobbishness which drained the life out of post-modernity from the Factory forward, and which we rebelled against.

One thing we never got from Jeremy was his life’s story— he’d unearth fragments of his childhood here and there, but the master narrative of his early life was not one he cared to share. I never got over the hunch that the buried pain for him was overwhelming— I know, for example, that Jeremy’s father was a phantom figure for him. I couldn’t even determine if he grew up lower middle-class or poor— that he went to Villanova and was never slovenly seemed to suggest lower middle-class. None of the four of us were obsessed with money— what Jeremy and I especially wanted was cultural capital. I came into a lump sum of cultural capital faster than he did, and he never forgave me for it— he obviously and blatantly felt banished to the hell of obscurity and toiling there. When Jeremy took this self-portrait, he had no way of knowing whether anyone would see it. By this time, I was publishing books and was also assured I could reach a reasonable audience whenever I wanted to (blogs helped, too). In retrospect, I admire Jeremy’s gumption, and the possible acknowledgment (which was very

much the truth) that he was asking for it, on a number of different levels. Part of his legacy must be the fear-of-no-legacy; and a reaction to this fear which bordered on the infernal.

Adam Fieled, 2013